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CONTENTS

CENTRO *VS.* PERIFERIA.
IL LATINO TRA TESTI E CONTESTI, LINGUA E LETTERATURA (I-V D.C.)
NAPOLI, UNIVERSITÀ FEDERICO II, 7-9 OTTOBRE 2015
A CURA DI ALESSANDRO GARCEA E MARIA CHIARA SCAPPATICCIO

LETTERS, WRITING CONVENTIONS, AND READING PRACTICES IN THE LATE ROMAN WORLD. ANALYSING LITERARY RECEPTION IN LATE ANTIQUITY AND BEYOND

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Scholarly analysis of pre-modern literature usually operates with classifications. To classify means to detect and rubricate similarities within a certain corpus of texts or literary genres and to subdivide those into assorted categories. Modern categorizations, however, do not necessarily reflect ancient concepts and ideas perfectly. The modern distinction between literary and non-literary letters is a textbook case of this. Ever since Adolf Deissmann proposed his crucial differentiation between «real letter» and «literary epistle» in 1908, scholars have critically questioned his approach.[1] Nevertheless, mostly for practical reasons, Deissmann's ghost lingers on in present day scholarship on Greek and Latin epistolography.[2]

Where letters are concerned, conventional criteria based on modern literary terms tend to be deficient in defining literature.[3] In Late Antiquity especially, categories such as manuscript transmission or a set of aesthetic and generic norms fail to distinguish so-called literary from non-literary letters.[4] In order to do justice to late antique understandings and concepts of literature, new ways of analysing the remnants of late Roman epistolary culture are called for. To gain a historically reliable insight into the vivid literary culture of Late Antiquity and beyond, an empirical approach to literature seems certainly the most practical.[5]

With a focus on senatorial letter-writing in the Latin West, this paper has a double aim. First, to discuss the distinction between literary and non-literary letters in order to propose a more coherent modern conceptualization of late antique 'literature'. This conceptualization is drawn and developed from analysing actual reading practises and writing conventions within specific aristocratic interpretive

[1] Deissmann (1923, pp. 194-196). For a critical discussion, see e.g. Koskenniemi (1956, pp. 88-91); Doty (1969, pp. 183-199); Stowers (1986, pp. 17-20); Rosenmeyer (2001, pp. 5-8); Wulfram (2008, pp. 39-45).

[2] As asserted by Rosenmeyer (2001, p. 11). The distinction between literary and non-literary letters is discussed and accepted by Schneider (2014, pp. 9-23).

[3] Letters are essentially pragmatic texts. For details, see Gibson, Morrison (2007, pp. 1-16). For more general considerations, see Nickisch (1996, pp. 357-364).

[4] For details, see Schwitter (2015, pp. 48-56).

[5] Since the second half of the twentieth century the category of 'literature' has been object of theoretical discussions focusing on poetry, drama and prose fiction, whereas letters are routinely ignored; see for a general state of question with focus on Late Antiquity Vessey (2015, pp. 27-39).

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communities. Secondly, the aim here is to argue that, at least in those aristocratic circles, there was a universally accepted practice of literary reading in all parts of the late Roman world, which had continuity into the Early Middle Ages. This is the case even if from the late fifth century internationally aligned aristocratic networks began to dwindle and imperial society as a whole to disintegrate after the establishment of rivalling barbarian kingdoms in the West.

I.

In the preface to the eleventh book of his *Variae* the sixth-century writer and official Cassiodorus (*c.* 490-590) apologizes for the humble style of the letters collected in this book. He claims that his many duties as a clerk at the court of the Ostrogothic king Theodoric did not allow him to write letters in the style his highly educated readers may have wanted him to.[1] This kind of apology was nothing new. In the general preface to his twelve-volume collection, Cassiodorus had already referred to want of time as an apologetic argument for the self-declared stylistic insufficiencies of the whole collection. Here he brings in an additional argument: the necessity for stylistic variation called for by a diversity of addressees (*qui personas varias suscepimus ammonere*). Cassiodorus states that he could not have written letters exclusively in the elaborate way his well-educated peers may have expected him to. Instead, he has had to adapt to the specific educational level of the several recipients of his letters. Whereas the majority of the correspondents needed a rather simple epistolary diction in order to understand the message, only a small elite, the *multa lectione satiati*, could appreciate highly stylised letters.[2] Owing, thus, to the practical function of his official letters, Cassiodorus was obliged to take into account the educational background of assorted addressees. In the end, the main reason for naming his collection *Variae* was not the thematic variation, but the stylistic diversity.[3] Obviously, Cassiodorus' apology in the preface to the eleventh book is an expression of modesty, but it still seems quite remarkable that he felt the need to explain why he was not completely able to fulfil the literary expectations of the readers for whom he intended his collection.[4]

The modern critic is not usually interested in the literary quality of letters from a regal registry. These texts are mostly time-bound legal documents, generally seen as a merely functional means for transferring information or, in this case, instructions from one person to another.[5] This, certainly, is the reason why to-

[1] Cassiod. *var.* 11 praef. 1-14.

[2] Cassiod. *var.* praef. 15: *(...) quia necesse nobis fuit stilum non unum sumere, qui personas varias suscepimus ammonere. aliter enim multa lectione satiatis, aliter mediocri gustatione suspensis, aliter a litterarum sapore ieiunis persuasionis causa loquendum est, ut interdum genus sit peritiae vitare quod doctis placeat. proinde maiorum pulchra definitio est sic apte dicere, ut audientibus possis concepta vota suadere.*

[3] Cassiod. *var.* praef. 15-16.

[4] Auerbach (1958, p. 195), however, had doubts, whether Cassiodorus' *Variae* were aimed at a literary audience: «Cassiodors Stil in den *Variae* setzt überhaupt kein literarisches Publikum mehr voraus, auch kein italoromanisches; es ist ein rhetorischer Kanzleistil, Urahne der Artes dictandi des Trecento».

[5] For this tradition, see e.g. *The Letter. Legal Documents in Ancient Societies 1: Law, State, Society, and the Epistolary Format in the Ancient World*, ed. Uri Yiftach-Firanko, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2013 («LDSE», 1).

day it is mostly historians, and not philologists, that are interested in the *Variae* of Cassiodorus, which generally are considered to be an important source for public administration in Late Antiquity. And yet, Cassiodorus seems to insist on the 'literary' quality of the collection. With a clear reference to Horace, he even compares his letters to pieces of art, to which authors should devote at least nine years perfecting.[1] Clearly, the conscious act of selecting and copying letters into a manuscript collection influenced the contemporary reader. By decisively changing its mediality this reuse of letters undoubtedly altered the nature and semantics of the original text, potentially signalling the reader to perceive the text as literature.[2] Thus, the mere act of publication put Cassiodorus' letter collection in line with the great archetypes of Latin epistolography, Cicero and Pliny, although he certainly did not know that Cicero had not published his letters himself. But this, in fact, is not what Cassiodorus tells us in his preface. He does not at all raise the question of whether his official letters are 'literature',[3] instead he just tries to explain why his letters reflect different styles. Indeed, he proudly points out that he masters various stylistic levels based on the rhetorical concept of *decorum* prescribed in epistolary theory.[4] Yet, Cassiodorus is well aware of the fact that, as a member of the social elite, he is expected to write in a preferably highly stylised manner, namely in the rhetorical code the educated elite in the fifth and sixth century conventionally used in epistolary communications with each other.[5] It is this extremely elaborate language, which distinguished Roman aristocrats from the underprivileged mass of that time.[6] This is what Cassiodorus meant when he stated that «the ability to talk is given to everyone, only ornate style separates the educated from the illiterate».[7] Similar opinions can be found in the works of Sidonius Apollinaris (*c*. 430/31-480/90), Ennodius (*c*. 473/74-521), and others.[8] Thus, for Cassiodorus the sole aim in his preface to the eleventh book was to apologize for not using the elite's linguistic code in official letters. Style, therefore, as a linguistic means for social distinction can, from the modern perspective, no longer form a true indication of any intended literary impact of a text. The language of a given letter will merely reflect certain communicative situations, rhetorical codes and epistolary mores of that time.

This finding might also help to deconstruct the nexus modern scholars conven-

[1] Cassiod. *var*. praef. 4: *nonus annus ad scribendum relaxatur auctoribus*, cf. Horace, *ars*. 388.

[2] See Gillett (2012, pp. 833-840).

[3] The term 'literature' is a product of nineteenth-century Romantic aesthetics and not a genuin category in the ancient world, see Goldhill (1999, pp. 57-58).

[4] E.g. *Exc. Rhet*. ed. Halm, 589,4-12: *In epistolis considerandum est, quis ad quem et qua de re scribat. in eo autem, quis ad quem scribat, personarum accidentia spectanda sunt, quae sunt decem: genus sexus aetas instructio ars officium mores affectus nomen dignitas. plurimum enim differt, nobili an seni an magistratui an patri an amico an prospere agenti an tristi scribamus, et his similia. (...)*. For a general overview of ancient epistolary theory, see Malherbe (1988); Poster (2007, pp. 21-51).

[5] It is important to stress that, stylistically, there was no difference between private and official letters in Late Antiquity, see Gioanni (2009, pp. 15-16, 19-20).

[6] Gioanni (2004 pp. 513-544); Schwitter (2015, pp. 213-227).

[7] Cassiodorus, *var*. praef. 3: *Loqui nobis communiter datum est; solus ornatus est, qui discernit indoctos.*

[8] E.g. Sidonius Apollinaris, *epist*. 4,17,2; *epist*. 8,2,2; Ennodius, *dict*. 10,4.

tionally draw between 'literature', publication and manuscript tradition.[1] We possess a large number of private and official letters from late antique bishops or clerics like Avitus of Vienne (*c.* 450-518), Ruricius of Limoges (c. 440-507) or Ennodius, which were not published during the lifetime of the authors and are only preserved because an unknown editor had compiled a collection sometime after the author's death. According to modern standards these texts had hardly any contemporary literary relevance before actually being published and are therefore more documentary evidence than works of literature.[2] Indeed, they are true remnants of real communication and not 'letters of art' – a term modern scholars readily apply to Pliny's nine books of letters.[3] Yet, stylistically, the letters of Avitus, Ruricius, or Ennodius do not differ from the self-published letters of Sidonius Apollinaris. They are, likewise, highly elaborate social performances, designed to advertise their authors' literary skill.[4] All three writers, furthermore, enjoyed a reputation as first-class epistolographers among their peers. In contrast to Sidonius, there are specimens transmitted in these letter collections of intimate and secret writing, surely never meant to be published; however; and even these texts are highly stylized.[5]

In consequence it is quite obvious that amongst the late Roman elite a highly elaborate style was commonly deployed in everyday writing. This leads to a simple conclusion: in late antique letter-writing practical objectives, intimacy and rhetorical form did not preclude each other in any way. An elaborate epistolary style, therefore, does not automatically indicate that an author aimed at a literary audience rather than a single person in a strictly private or functional matter. With this in mind, one may finally conclude that at least with focus on the micro-communities of the mentioned authors, the distinction between literary and non-literary letters based on manuscript tradition and literary form is misleading. It is a mere projection of modern ideas of 'literature' and gives no true account of the ways of literary reception – in the broader sense of taking aesthetic pleasure[6] – in Late Antiquity. A more objective approach should instead focus on actual reading practices and writing conventions within specific interpretive communities in the late Roman world. Leaving fictional texts aside,[7] only the reconstruction of the essential 'contracts' between texts and readers grants historical reliability and offers insight into forms and manners of literary reception within certain interpretive communities in Antiquity.[8]

[1] The importance of manuscript tradition for defining 'literature' is stressed by Fuhrmann (1999, pp. 14-16). See also Suerbaum (2002, pp. 9-10).

[2] See Zelzer (1997, p. 324): «Zur Literatur wurde ein Brief aber nicht durch seinen Inhalt, sondern erst durch seine Publikation, die des Verfassers oder des Inhalts wegen erfolgen konnte, nach dessen Tod oder schon zu dessen Lebzeiten, von Seiten anderer oder des Verfassers selbst».

[3] See e.g. Cugusi (1989, pp. 381).

[4] See Ebbeler (2009, pp. 272-273).

[5] For secretive writing in late antique epistolography, see Schwitter (2015, pp. 237-297).

[6] In Antiquity aesthetic pleasure and didactic utility (*delectare* and *docere*) were the two principal functions of literature, see Horace, *ars*. 333f.

[7] A fictive letter is one that cannot be sent in the real world, either because the author or the addressee is fictitious or impersonated by another writer, or the actual sending of the letter is impossible. They are basically a Greek phenomenon (see Rosenmeyer, 2001), although famous Latin examples are known, e.g. Ovid's *Heroides*.

[8] Even though elementary knowledge in reading and writing was common, at least from the first century A.D. onward, the main participants in literary communication were members of the upper class.

II.

It seems to be no coincidence that the written product of daily social interactions between late Roman aristocrats met the contemporary standards of what they generally conceived as literature. The reason for this peculiarity lies in the fact that late antique writers adapted the rhetorically trained art of letter-writing not only for literary products meant to be published, but also for their official and personal everyday correspondences – at least as long as they were directed to members of their own social group. Apparently, within these aristocratic peer groups there was a certain mutual understanding, in other words, that largely defined the reception of a given text.

Since the act of reading is multiform and not every reading is a literary one, it is decisive to determine the factors that rendered private letters literary products for any late antique reader.[1] I have already argued that style as an indicator per se is ambiguous, as are other conventional characteristics of literary form, such as embedded poems, historical examples or mythological references.[2] In order to reconstruct the baselines of these contracts one can establish a set of criteria that influenced the ancient reader to perform a literary reading. A literary reading was called for mainly by a combination of three elements: a text's intrinsic features (e.g. style, metatextual comments); the context of reception (e.g. banquet); and medium (e.g. script, roll/codex, paratexts). By this scheme the writer's intention is of no great importance. In classical studies the author is traditionally regarded as a key factor for determining whether a text is literary or not.[3] However, in the complex historical realities of Late Antiquity this concept is obviously too narrow, especially with regard to letters. It was the contemporary reader who decided whether or not he would decode a given text in a literary way. Methodologically, my further assumptions are thus mainly based on the premises of reader-response theory.[4]

Let us begin first with the medium. Copying a letter into a manuscript collection certainly changed its form and nature.[5] As it was customary in Antiquity to acquire and read literary works in the form of a *liber* or *volumen*,[6] letters collected in a roll or codex had a different effect on the reader than single letters on papyrus, lead-tablets, or other material. Yet, this does not mean that a documentary letter could not have any literary potential per se. The modern perception

[1] On the late modern assumption that every text has a literary quality per se, it is only through the process of reception a letter becomes 'literary'. It was the task of the reader to activate its potential or to leave it and read the letter in another way. I will, therefore, talk of literary readings instead of literary texts. For theoretical backgrounds, see Gross (1994).

[2] Metrical letters are e.g. Ruricius, *epist.* 2,19; *Liber epist.* 13 ed. Malaspina; Desiderius of Cahors, *epist.* 2,1.

[3] For letters, see the typological approach of Cugusi (1983). See also Hutchinson (1993, pp. 441-451); Idem (1998).

[4] Fruitfully applied for late antique poetry by Pelttari (2014).

[5] See e.g. Gillett (2012, p. 83). Collecting letters of the same kind, or specific ordering patterns within a collection could, for example, emphasize didactic means, see Gibson (2012, pp. 73-76).

[6] See Johnson (2000, pp. 593-627). For details still unreplaced Birt (1882, esp. pp. 342-370).

is blurred by the fact that most surviving documentary letters derive from minor social strata: schoolchildren, soldiers, or minor bureaucrats, who could not match the artistic elegance of the senatorial elite.[1] But this is more a social than a literary phenomenon, as the less educated were not able to master the sophisticated linguistic and rhetorical codes commonly employed by the members of the Roman *Bildungselite*.

Script also was decisive with regard to questions of medium.[2] It certainly made a difference whether the letters of Cassiodorus were read in calligraphic bookhand or in the original chancery hand. Each script has its specific conventional uses and semantic implications. A personal hand-writing or signature in a letter communicates intimacy and authenticity, whereas *capitalis quadrata* in public marble inscriptions could convey imperial *maiestas*.

The importance of a codex-collection is, however, generally overestimated. By publishing a letter-collection an author (or later editor) surely could incite a literary reading; paratexts, of course, were important.[3] Yet, there are examples of published letter-collections in Antiquity that have been read with a mere biographical interest. On the other hand, originally functional texts did sometimes receive a literary reading.[4] Anyhow, with regard to letters the instance of authorial self-publication seems to be more important for modern scholars than for ancient readers.[5] Furthermore, some letters circulated within a small group of recipients displaying their literary potential, without ever being copied into a codex.[6] The small-scale circulation of poems and other texts among friends and patrons was common practice in Rome. Sometimes, even for letters, the public reception was limited to an oral performance, for instance, in a classical banquet situation.[7] In both cases, a literary reception was prompted or influenced not by the textual materiality or the specific semantics of a codex-collection or its script but by the shared strategies, values and interpretive assumptions of specific communities in a certain situation. For defining literary readings the context of reception must be taken into account.

The way a text is received depends very much on the communicative settings in which it is presented, and the customary expectations connected to these. Schoolrooms, theatres, public recitations in libraries and banquets were places of formalized 'literary' communication and therefore invited the audience to perform

[1] For examples, see Cotton (1981); Bagnall, Cribiore (2006) and Halla-aho (2009).

[2] See Eigler (2000, pp. 46-62). On the semantics of materiality, see Gross (1994, pp. 58-59).

[3] For the importance of paratexts mediating between book and reader, see Genette (1997).

[4] See e.g. Cornelius Nepos' comment on the function of Cicero's collection of letters (*Att*. 16,3). Suetonius used published private letter-collections of Caesar and Augustus to get information about their life and habits, e.g. Suetonius, *Div. Iul*. 56; *Aug*. 87. There was, however, no systematic connection between ancient letter-collections and biographical or historical narration, see Gibson (2012, pp. 56-57, 70).

[5] Present day scholarship on ancient letters strongly emphasizes the meaning of self-publication, see e.g. Ludolph (1997, pp. 23-28); Wulfram (2008, pp. 36-51).

[6] This is e.g. the case with letters that have been transmitted in letter-collections of other epistolographers, e.g. Augustinus, *epist*. 24 (= a letter of Paulinus of Nola to Alypius); Desiderius of Cahors, *epist*. 2,5 (= a letter of Sulpicius of Bourges to Verus of Rodez).

[7] See Starr (1987, pp. 213-223).

a literary reading.[1] Courts, imperial chambers and episcopal registries were not. Results from cognitive reading research show that the reader's expectation of a text is determined by external factors.[2] Thus, in the right contexts and guided by an authority of some kind, readers are quite able to apprehend literary dimensions in each and every text, regardless of form or content.[3] In Antiquity though, a text undeniably had to fulfill some basic requirements in form and style to be conceived as literature, at least from the point of view of the educated elite trained in the schools of grammar and rhetoric.[4] Therefore, probably the most important factor indeed were signals within the text. There is a variety of implicit hints and explicit textual signals that provide the interpretive framework of a given letter. The *inscriptio* helped defining whether a letter was private or official.[5] Key words, rhetorical display and structure assured that the recipient was able to detect the practical function of a letter (e.g. invitation, recommendation, appeal).[6] Other conventional characteristics of literary form such as intertextual allusions or historical similes, which demand the participation of the reader, also played an important role.[7] Style, of course, especially when backed up by authorial meta-textual comments, was evidently a clear invitation for the audience to perform a literary reading. When Sidonius Apollinaris published his private letters he claimed, like Pliny, to have revised his letters stylistically, implying that when he had first sent them, they did not match up to the levels of polish expected by his learned audience.[8] Sulpicius Severus criticised his mother-in-law for publishing his private letters and documents, which according to him were not written in a suitably representable style.[9] The claim to have written texts that need to be revised by a friend or the author himself for literary reasons is the most common *captatio benevolentiae*.[10] Yet, as seen in the case of Cassiodorus such assertions should in fact sharpen the reader's awareness of the formal excellence and stylistic brilliance of the collected letters.[11]

Meta-textual comments and literary self-reflections are not peculiar to self-published letter-collections. Style, indeed, was a major issue in the letter-exchanges of late Roman aristocrats, but, as mentioned before, not exclusively in literary terms. Talking about style was a popular way to express and consolidate the bounds of friendship by celebrating the *sermo cultus* of one's correspondent on the one hand and by writing back letters equally recherché on the other hand. The more time-

[1] Letters and poems were mostly read in private (e.g. in the library of the country villa). For the literary activities of late antique aristocrats in the leisure of a villa in the country, see Cameron (2011, pp. 396-398).

[2] Gross (1994, pp. 11-13).

[3] In a famous experiment proven by Fish (1980, pp. 322-373).

[4] Grammarians played in the later Roman empire an important role in preserving cultural identity, see Kaster (1988).

[5] See with focus on Cicero Corbinelli (2008, pp. 31-38).

[6] In consequence, a sense for generic convention and standardization is also common in documentary letters, cfr. Poster (2007, pp. 40-41).

[7] On allusions, see Pelttari (2014, pp. 115-160).

[8] Plinius, *epist*. 1,1; Sidonius Apollinaris, *epist*. 1,1.

[9] Sulpicius Severus, *epist*. 3,1-3.

[10] Common in epistolary prefaces, e.g. Sidonius Apollinaris, *epist*. 1,1,3; *epist*. 8,16; *epist*. 9,11. See Janson (1964, pp. 106-112, 141-143).

[11] The art of Cassiodorus' letters is rightly emphasized by Kakridi (2005, pp. 76-98, 110-127).

consuming a letter had been to compose the more affection it communicated to its addressee.[1] Senatorial letters were indeed «textualized social performances»,[2] which combined literary expression with practical needs.

III.

The schools of liberal studies strongly contributed to the evolution of a customary set of writing conventions, reading practices and interpretive techniques that shaped the forms of literary reception in Late Antiquity. The classical literary and rhetorical models traditionally learned and trained in at school represented the main points of reference. In all parts of the Roman empire the educated elite read more or less the same texts at school and shared the same literary ideals, which was reflected in their writings.[3] In this respect, there never was any significant difference between the imperial core and provincial elites at the periphery of the Roman empire. Moreover, with regard to letters, the stylistic preciosity of the *sermo epistolaris* as an elite marker actually connected centre and periphery and, as we will see, helped the elite to create and consolidate a commonly shared social identity as Romans in an already fragmented empire.

In Late Antiquity communication was global in the sense that each member of the social elite could potentially participate in internationally aligned epistolary networks in order to build relationships, to exchange information and, even more importantly, books.[4] In the fourth and early fifth centuries Christian epistolary networks were especially highly developed, in which they shared and spread common ideas and beliefs. In the Latin West a famous example of this kind of practice is that of Paulinus of Nola, who had correspondents not only in Italy, Gaul and North Africa, but also in countries at the periphery of the known world (*terra extrema*).[5]

The disintegration of the imperial core in the West and the establishment of rival barbarian kingdoms (which, in Gaul, for instance, rather complicated cross-border communication) evidently inhibited this astonishing Mediterranean interconnectedness.[6] Since the late fifth century aristocratic epistolary networks in Gaul were losing their international links. Sidonius Apollinaris' 112 correspondents lived in central and southern Gaul, around centres such as Clermont, Lyon, Narbonne, and Bordeaux.[7] The geographical range of the epistolary network of Ruricius of Limoges, closely connected to that of Sidonius, was even smaller.[8] Thus, the lively Christian «circulation of libraries» seems to have come to an end at about this

[1] A good example of this is the correspondence between Symmachus and Ausonius, see Schwitter (2015, pp. 132-137). Modern studies devoted to the connection between Roman *amicitia* and epistolography are numerous, see recently Wilcox (2012); and with focus on Late Antiquity Mathisen (1981, pp. 95-109); Bruggisser (1993); Le Jan (2004, pp. 528-546).

[2] Ebbeler (2007, p. 307).

[3] See e.g. Brown (1992, pp. 35-70).

[4] Of cause, public communication was equally global, see Gillett (2003).

[5] Paulinus of Nola, *epist*. 18,4. For details, see the fundamental work of Mratschek (2002).

[6] See Schwitter (2015, pp. 257-258, 285-288).

[7] See Kaufmann (1995, pp. 275-356).

[8] See Mathisen (1999).

point or, at least, to have lost its global range.[1] In Gaul change was undeniably greater than in other regions, Africa for instance, which was solidly under Vandal rule.[2] There had been a tradition of Gallo-Roman patriotism and separatism from the third century A.D.,[3] which, to some degree, even affected literary production.[4] In the late fifth and early sixth century the process of segregation further intensified and it manifested itself visually in the development of a specific Gallic script.[5] Ultimately, only the Christian church and its head, the papacy in Rome, still represented an on-going claim for unity and universality in the Latin West.[6]

Despite, however, its geographic fragmentations and regional splintering, the importance of the Mediterranean *Leitkultur* seems to have remained unbroken in all parts of the former western empire, for the time being at any rate.[7] There were at least two factors that ensured continuity. First, the traditionalistic concept of *Romanitas* (which was undergoing a process of redefinition)[8] was essentially connected to a retrospective literary tradition, and therefore boosted quite naturally the elite's interest in maintaining the *studia humaniora*.[9] Although aristocrats in Gaul, Spain, Africa and Italy were no longer part of the empire, «their individual histories were still inextricably linked to the ancient history of the Roman empire».[10] Fifth- and sixth-century Roman aristocrats therefore were eager to preserve the literary achievements of their forefathers. Private libraries and literary circles obviously managed, at least to some point, to substitute for the decaying educational system and its vanishing public institutions. Second, the knowledge and mastery of an elaborate linguistic code still guaranteed social exclusiveness. In the post-imperial era classical education and stylistic preciosity continued to be an important elite marker, which again helped to create and consolidate a commonly shared social identity as Romans within this privileged group. As a result of the epistolary topos of *speculum animae*, letters remained a conventional medium to negotiate social status and identity. This is one of the reasons why in Visigothic Gaul and Osthrogothic Italy Roman aristocrats wanted to ensure the literary abilities of their offspring.[11]

[1] For the vivid exchange of books as cultural practice in Late Antiquity, see Mratschek (2011, pp. 325-350). [2] See Conant (2012). [3] See Drinkwater (1987).

[4] See with further bibliographical references Eigler (2013, pp. 399-419).

[5] See Cencetti (1997, pp. 79-82).

[6] See with focus on Sidonius Apollinaris Fournier, Stoehr-Monjou (2014. Retrieved January 22, 2016, from http://belgeo.revues.org/12689, p. 61).

[7] For North Africa, see e.g. Conant (2012); for Spain Martyn (2008); for Italy Schäfer (1991); for Gaul Mathisen (1993).

[8] See e.g. *Fifth-Century Gaul. A Crisis of Identity?*, eds. John Drinkwater, Hugh Elton, Cambridge, University Press (1992); *Constructing Identities in Late Antiquity*, ed. Richard Miles, London, Routledge (1999); *Romans, Barbarians, and the Transformation of the Roman World. Cultural Interaction and the Creation of Identity in Late Antiquity*, eds. Ralph W. Mathisen, Danuta Shanzer, Farnham, Ashgate (2011), and with focus on the post-imperial era *Post-Roman Transitions. Christian and Barbarian Identities in the Early Medieval West*, eds. Walter Pohl, Gerda Heydemann, Turnhout, Brepols (2013).

[9] For the retrospective tendencies of late antique literary culture, see Eigler (2003).

[10] Conant (2012, p. 190).

[11] E.g. Ruricius, *epist*. 1,3,29-40; Ennodius, *dict*. 10. See Kennell (2000, pp. 51-55); Gerth (2013, pp. 160-171.

The literary production in general might have decreased in the sixth and seventh century, but the works dating from that period show that one of the core principles of late antique literature was intact, namely, the expressive and provocative confrontation with traditional literary models.[1] The poems of Dracontius, Avitus of Vienne, Ennodius, Venantius Fortunatus (*c*. 530-610), or King Sisebut (reg. 612-621) testify to the continuity of a literary tradition that was designed around a relatively small canon of normative texts.[2] Indirectly, it also reflects certain reading practices, because the conscious process of *imitatio* and *aemulatio*, which traditionally challenged literary archetypes, was a conventional invitation to the audience to perform a literary reading throughout Antiquity.[3] Although the specific contexts of reception can no longer be traced, the surviving texts clearly point to a common understanding of literary reading in almost every part of the former Latin West in the sixth and seventh century. This is also true for post-imperial epistolography, especially in Gaul. In topic, style, and practical function the letters of Desiderius of Cahors and other writers in seventh century Gaul persist in the tradition of the senatorial letter-writing of the fourth and fifth centuries reaching back to literary models like Cicero and Pliny.[4] Venantius Fortunatus, for example, wrote not only verse letters in the tradition of Horace and Ausonius in private epistolary exchanges with his learned peers, but even composed pragmatic *epistolae commentaticiae* and official writings in the name of a Merovingian king in verses.[5] Hence, one can conclude that within small and dispersed communities specific aristocratic writing habits must have been preserved. Obviously the context of reception did not change either, and neither did the reading practices connected with it. Gogo, Desiderius or Venantius Fortunatus undoubtedly addressed an audience capable of appreciating the literary qualities of their letters.[6] Yet again, style, rhetorical form and pragmatic means did not preclude each other. A literary reading in the sense of gaining an aesthetic experience was only one of several possibilities, depending on the context of reception and the individual abilities, preconditions, and expectations of the reader.

The relevance and impact of the classical tradition in post-imperial literary culture, however, was not undisputed. Scholars have pointed out that the predominance of Cicero and Vergil as stylistic models was undercut by a specific Christian code based on the *sermo simplex et communis* of the widely spread Latin translations of biblical scripts.[7] This new linguistic standard questioned the universally

[1] Herzog (1989, p. 33).

[2] See e.g. Arweiler (1999); Tizzoni (2014, pp. 87-105); George (1992); Martyn (2008).

[3] See e.g. Reiff (1959).

[4] See e.g. Dumézil (2007, pp. 553-593); Le Jan (2004); Schwitter (2013, pp. 86-100), and with special focus on letters of recommendation Furbetta (2015, pp. 358-366).

[5] E.g. *Liber epist.* 43 ed. Malaspina is attributed to Venantius Fortunatus, see Furbetta (2015, p. 360).

[6] The highly educated Merovingian mayor of the palace Gogo wrote letters (*Liber epist.* 12; 13; 16; 17 ed. Malaspina) and poetry. Venantius Fortunatus compared him to the mythical singer Orpheus (*carm.* 7).

[7] See Müller (2001 pp. 314-320); Eigler (2003, pp. 128-146), and with focus on Gaul Eigler (2013, pp. 407-414).

accepted scholastic code,[1] but could not displace it completely. During the sixth and seventh centuries, however, when the Christian movement eventually became the dominant cultural framework, the traditional *consuetudo doctissimorum* seems to have steadily been replaced by the *consuetudo imperitorum* (Augustinus, *civ*. 10,1), until the old *norma rectudinis* regained influence in the Carolingian period.[2] This is manifestly the case with hagiography. Yet, this development probably did affect literary reception only to some degree, although the conceptualization of reading has unquestionably changed in Christian contexts.[3] As already predetermined by patristic literature the normative linguistic code, as well as the old intertextuality were simply replaced by new ones. Allusions to the bible or church fathers provided religious authority and could at the same time satisfy literary expectations. Thus, with regard to content, the considerable quantity of regionally embedded hagiographical texts might only have had relevance for certain local communities at a certain period of time; nevertheless, with regard to form, they were still globally linked in the sense that they shared the same literary conventions with the remaining parts of the Western Christian world.

There is on the other hand clear evidence that the Christian *consuetudo imperitorum* was restricted mainly to prose. Let me give you only one brief example. Around the year 600 A.D. the bishop of Auxerre, Aunarius asked the presbyter Stephanus Africanus in a carefully written letter to set the life of Germanus of Auxerre (*c*. 378-437/448) to verse, and to write the prose life of Amator, Germanus' predecessor.[4] In his elaborate response Stephanus accepted the task while simultaneously highlighting his literary skills.[5] As a reason for his assignment Aunarius gave the *diversitas humanarum mentium*, according to which «some people like prose, others like rhythms and verses».[6] It was, naturally, in the interest of the literary promotion of the saint's cult that his vita should satisfy the different reading practices and preferences of the projected audience. Versifying a saint's life was a rather common practice in Late Antiquity and became important once again in the Carolingian era.[7] In order to understand this phenomenon and its literary implications it might be illustrative to consider a Carolingian scholar's argument for writing a saint's life both in verse and prose. In the preface to his *Vita Willibrordi* Alcuin (*c*. 730-804) states that he composed two books in respect of

[1] E.g. the attempts of Caesarius of Arles (*serm*. 86,1) and pope Gregory the Great (*epist*. 11,34; *epist*. 5,53a).

[2] See e.g. Eigler (2003, pp. 142-146).

[3] On the Christian reader in Late Antiquity, see Goldhill (1999, pp. 76-83).

[4] *Epistulae aevi Merowingici collectae*, 7, p. 447. Stephanus' verse life of Germanus is lost. His *Vita s. Amatoris* is printed in AASS Mai 1, pp. 51-61.

[5] *Epistulae aevi Merowingici collectae*, 8, pp. 447-448. Both letters stand in the tradition of prefatory letters, where the assertion of *rusticitas* is common, see Janson (1964, pp. 106-112, 124-125).

[6] *Epistulae aevi Merowingici collectae*, 7, p. 447, 15-19: *Cognitum tibi est, karissime frater, quae sit humanarum mentium diversitas, et quemadmodum studia in contraria non solum inane vulgus, verum etiam universa scindatur nobilitas; et quidam quidem prosaico obectantur stilo, quidam autem numeris se rithmisve ac cantibus versuum delectari fatentur: ergo ut omnium votis occurrerem, et nullus suo desiderio fraudaretur, placuit michi, ut vitas beatissimorum (...)*.

[7] See e.g. Kirsch (2004). For the Carolingian practice of rewriting Merovingian *vitae*, see Goullet (2005).

two specific contexts of reception: prose is meant for public lecture in the church, whereas poetry is for the silent contemplation of educated readers.[1] Alcuin's distinction between a general, unlearned and a learned, particular audience might also have been in Aunarius' mind, when he distinguishes between *inane vulgus* and *nobilitas*, yet in a more general sense. Thus, a hagiographical text in prose was clearly meant for a practical-liturgical purpose, whereas the verse version primarily aimed at a learned audience for private reading. This distinction, however, does not imply any literary judgment in the sense that one is, somehow, less 'literary' than the other. Different contexts of reception simply call for different modes of presentation. This, of course, works both ways as the audience had different expectations according to the specific communicative setting in which a given text was received.

Towards the Early Middle Ages the cultural landscape may have changed and interpretive communities may have altered, but the practice of aristocratic letter-writing, as well as the basic form of literary reception and the conventions connected with this, were apparently retained.

I hope to have shown in outline that with regard to late antique epistolography, 'literature', in its modern technical sense, appears to be a category scarcely justifying application to the described historical framework. It might, therefore, be preferable to apply a wider definition of 'text',[2] and, in so doing, to re-establish the disordered connection between the various forms of textual production in the ancient world and the culture in which these were produced and received.[3]

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[1] Alcuin, *Willib.* 1 prol. ed. Levison, p. 113, 16-20: *Duos digessi libellos, unum prosaico sermone gradientem, (...) alterum Pierio pede currentem: unum (...), qui publice fratribus in ecclesia (...) legi potuisset, (...) alterum, (...) qui in secreto cubili inter scolasticos tuos tantummodo ruminare debuisset (...).* Alcuin thought that he would follow the steps of Bede, see Alcuin, *carm.* 1, 684-687 ed. Dümmler, p. 184: *Omnia quae dudum praeclarus Beda sacerdos / prosaice primum scripsit sermone magister, / et post heroico cecinit miracula versu (...).*, which was wrong, see Berschin (1991, pp. 121-123).

[2] For the late modern expansion of the term 'literature', see e.g. Ubrich (2010, pp. 11-13).

[3] See Goldhill (1999, p. 84).

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ABSTRACT

This paper questions the common modern distinction between literary and non-literary texts in Graeco-Roman culture. With special focus on the private and official letters of aristocrats in Late Antique Gaul it will be shown that, neither from the point of view of the writer, nor from that of the contemporary reader, did a given letter not have a 'literary' quality per se. Obvious differences in language and style are not necessarily an indication of an intended 'literary' or 'non-literary' reception, they merely reflect different communicative situations and rhetorical codes. The form of transmission or medial representation may serve as false friends: Cassiodor's official letters, for example, were legal texts in the first place, but became 'literature' by being copied into a manuscript collection. This 'redeployment' truly changed the nature and semantic of the original text by changing its mediality, signalling to or preparing the reader for a specific literary reception. Thus the private letter exchanges of Avitus of Vienne, Ennodius or Ruricius of Limoges – indeed highly elaborate social performances – were only collected and published after their authors had died. However these letters certainly had a 'literary' reception during contemporary circulation within the peergroups of their authors. Instead of projecting modern ideas of 'the literary' onto Late Antiquity, one would therefore do well to look at the actual reading conventions and habits within the elite micro-communities in which these letters were exchanged. Fictional texts aside, only the reconstruction of the essential 'contracts' between texts and readers makes for historical reliability and offers insight into the forms and manners of literary reception within relatively closed interpretative communities.

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